



Advent Evensong

A meditation by Anne Breck Peterson

December 21, 2008

God of darkness and light, God of seasons and cycles—gather us into your essence, into the womb of all creation. From your energy of love deep within the universe, speak to us through your word, through our prayers and through the glorious music of tonight. Amen.

We are poised tonight at the edge of the miraculous. In our Advent story a young person, Mary, is about to give birth for the first time.

Tonight we are all pregnant—male/female; young/old; partnered or single; firm or infirm; fertile or infertile. We are all pregnant with the promise of delivering God to the world.

There are several things to remember about our nine-month gestation process. It is one month too long. The rosy glow of carrying around new life wears off when what is inside you is too large, too active for you to get any sleep. The fear is that the thing inside you must be a strange being the way it bumps around with seven elbows. Giving birth can be a challenging and exhausting as well as an exhilarating experience, physically and emotionally. And most importantly, once we are pregnant, there is, generally speaking, no going back, only moving forward, trusting in God and good care, that both the bearer of God's gift and the gift itself will come out all right.

There is no doubt but that our composer tonight delivered God to the world, early and often. Benjamin Britten was born on the feast day of St. Cecelia, who is the patron saint of musicians. He grew up the youngest of 4 in a family who loved him and encouraged his gifts. He was good at athletics, good at mathematics, and excited by music. He began at age 5, composing small tone poems about his father going to work and coming home—and was a published composer by the age of 12.

Britten composed *A Ceremony of Carols* on a ship on his way home from two years in the United States. It was after spending time in California that he realized how homesick he was for the coast of England where he had grown up. At the time of his voyage in 1942, the world was immersed in the Second World War. Britten was a pacifist, and he worried about being received at home as ungrateful and unpatriotic when so many had given their lives in defense of their country. On his trip, using texts from *The English Galaxy of Shorter Poems* by Gerald Bullett, Britten's creative mind gave birth to *A Ceremony of Carols*. These

crisp, clear, bright sounds communicate joy and the affirmation of life, as well as nostalgia for England, for his family, and for his happy years as a young boy.

The very old language of some of the anonymous poems takes us back in time to a word lighted only by fire, to the ancient English epic of *Beowulf* and the scene of the warriors in the bitter cold and dark, weary from battling the monster Grendel, approaching the great castle of Hrothgar and seeing the blaze of the fire in the warm mead hall.

The poets whose identities are known all lived during the dangerous period of the English Reformation when Catholics and Puritans were very much at odds. All were in trouble as a result of their writings—either in favor of or in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church. The Wedderburn brothers all died in exile. And Robert Southwell was imprisoned, then hung, drawn and quartered at the age of 34.

Tonight we await the arrival of the Christ child, God's announcement of a new world order, arriving in the most unexpected form of an infant. Robert Southwell articulates this arrival of a paradoxical new power in his poem "This Little Babe." In his extended metaphor, Southwell depicts the baby Jesus as a warrior—with all of his soft, defenseless baby traits becoming the powerful weapons which will "rifle Satan's fold." Though weak and unarmed all hell shakes at this baby's presence, even as the baby himself shakes with cold. He fights with tears; his bare breast is his shield; his tiny cries, battle shouts; the looks from his weeping eyes, arrows. And the last couplet announces that a way to defeat the enemy is with joy.

God is calling us to create a new world order. We have the resources within us. Each of us in our own way can contribute to this effort. We are artists, reconcilers, pioneers, justice bringers, conservers, imaginers, relation-builders. Each of us has it within us to give birth to something that will revolutionize the world and help bring about God's heaven on earth. Why do we not just do it?

I believe that the sin of our age is Distraction. We want to give birth to God's new order. And we want to discern what it is in us that is craving to be born. But what with the demands and complexities of our lives in the midst of a world of instant information overload—blogs, blackberries, emails, face books, not to mention television programs we have two'd and can't find time to watch—there really isn't time to get that discerning done. If we are to be about this critically important work of bringing God to birth—despite distractions—we need resources.

St. Paul says tonight, in the letter to the Ephesians, "Put on the full armor of God, so that you can stand firm against the tactics of the Devil." We need help against the Devil, the Distractor, who keeps us busy with so many things that we do not even notice that we are not

discerning what it is of God in us that we are to bring forth into the world. Paul indicates that appropriate clothing can be helpful.

I know this. In my hiking boots I am ready to scale mountains. In my party shoes I am ready to dance the night away. Canterbury Choir, James Walker, Elizabeth Lenti, Ed Bacon, and I have put on vestments tonight—which indicate to you and to each of us, that we have stepped into the role of facilitators of worship, with the sense of professionalism that this requires. Do we then not need some appropriate garments with which to deal with ourselves and with which to beat back the distractions that keep us from bringing our own gift of God into the world?

We are warriors against our own epic Grendel monsters—our egos, our pride, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, greed, and sloth, and whatever it is in us as individuals or as a collective that allows us to permit any baby to be born into an unsupported world of poverty and discrimination, lacking the possibilities of a proper education or a healthy family structure. Get ready for the battle, says Paul. Put on God’s belt, breastplate, footgear, shield, helmet and sword. Or, if you don’t think you have time for the full battle regalia, just read the first line of my favorite prayer, a prayer which sustains me—the prayer for the first Sunday of Advent. “Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility.”

In 1961 Benjamin Britten gave birth to one of his most significant works, the *War Requiem*. It premiered in the new Cathedral in Coventry, which was constructed next to the ruins of the medieval cathedral, which had been destroyed by bombing in World War II. For the libretto Britten used the Latin text of the mass for the dead and placed alongside those classic words, the bitter anti-war poems of Wilfred Owen, who had died young in the First World War. Britten’s work manages to communicate deep sympathy with the ability of human beings to inflict suffering on themselves, as well as to make a statement about war’s futility. He uses Wilfred Owen’s words to introduce the piece: “My subject is War and the pity of War....all a poet can do is warn.” Life-long pacifist and brilliant musician Benjamin Britten communicated a deep truth in ways that only he could do.

Babies enter the world when they are good and ready. People involved in this birthing process are forced to clear their calendars—because babies don’t care what else is on your schedule. There is something deep within you waiting to be born—something the world needs. Feel the urgency of this and make a space for God to be born in the world, through you.

Amen.